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HISTORY OF

The Underground
Railroad

of McDonough County,
Illinois

1922



HISTORY OF
THE UNDERGROUND
RAILROAD

OF McDONOUGH COUNTY,
ILLINOIS

DEDICATED TO
McDONOUGH COUNTY HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1922

D. N. BLAZER
Aledo, Illinois

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To the McDonough County Historical Society

Ladies and Gentlemen:



HAVE been asked to write a historical account of the underground railway that was in existence in McDonough county before the Civil war, but it is impossible, after a lapse of more than sixty years, with no authentic records to draw from, to assemble anything like a chronological account of the events that transpired in those troubled times. As it is my aim to deal only with those events that I know to be true, I must therefore confine my account largely to episodes that came directly under my attention as a boy, and to incidents related to me by my father and mother, coupled with much valuable information secured from the children of Andrew and Harmon Allison, who like the Blazers were ardent abolitionists, and a part of the underground system. I trust that this account, which is as accurate and complete as it is in my power to give it at this late date, may assist you in gaining an idea of the strife and animosities that existed in the decade ending in 1860.

It was preached that slavery was a divine institution and that the negro was nothing more than an animal; the fearless men who operated the underground system were criminals in the eyes of the law but they gained courage

for their dangerous work in the firm belief that they were performing a duty in the eyes of God and that the black man was a human being with a soul.

All underground railroads started on the line of some free state that bordered on a slave state. The road that extended through McDonough county started at Quincy, which was station No. 1, receiving negroes from across the Mississippi river in Missouri. Station No. 2 was down at Round Prairie in Hancock county, at the Pettyjohn or Burton home. Station No. 3, in McDonough county, was generally at the home of some one of the Blazers down on Camp Creek in Industry township, or at the home of Uncle Billy Allison, or one of his sons up on Troublesome Creek. Part of them lived in Chalmers and others in Scotland township. Station No. 4 was at the home of Henry Dobbins in Fulton county, from whence cargoes of negroes were dispatched to Galesburg, Princeton and on to Canada, the terminus of all underground railroads. It is interesting to recall that the Princeton station was in charge of the Lovejoy family, which played such an important part in the early abolition movement.

Oratorical Genius No Match For Hatred Against Emancipation

At the time when the quarrel between the abolitionists and adherents of slavery was becoming most bitter, proponents of emancipation engaged an orator to speak afternoon and night at Old Camp Creek church, then located about a mile and a half southeast of Ebenezer church and a like distance southwest of the present Camp Creek church. Antagonists served notice that the speaker would not be permitted to talk, and when the afternoon meeting hour drew near there was an organized gang present bent on breaking up the meeting and probably doing violence to the orator. These men were armed and acting in a threatening manner.

The atmosphere was tense with excitement. Bloodshed was feared.

There were men and women present, who, while not in sympathy with any argument that could be delivered against slavery, were governed by cooler judgments, and they prevailed upon the gang not to start any trouble. "Let him speak; we'd like to hear what he has to say," was the admonition that calmed the armed band.

The address was an impassioned speech depicting the negro in chains, cowed to the dust under the whip of the master, sold and bartered like cattle and torn asunder mother from child, father from son—the negro, though black by no fault of his own, born in the image of his Creator and entitled to life, liberty and happiness no less than his white brother.

The orator held his audience well, but only for the moment. Animosities were too bitter to be wiped out with a single flash of oratorical genius; hatred of the negro as a free and equal being was too deeply imbedded. When the address was finished and the more inflammable minds descended to the level of everyday thinking, these hatreds and animosities again came to the surface, and there was a general determination that the speaker had said enough for one day. A council of the abolitionists was held, and both men and women debated whether or not it would be advisable to permit the speaker to go through with his evening program. It was finally decided that in order to avoid probable bloodshed, the evening session should be called off.

Men Carried Rifles When They Went to the Ballot Box

In 1852 the abolitionists had a candidate for president in John P. Hale. The adherents of slavery declared there should not be an abolitionist vote cast in McDonough county.

In those days there were a number of voting places in the county and any resident could go where he chose to vote, but there was no secret ballot then. When you went to the polls you gave the clerk your name, who wrote it down, called through the list of offices to be filled and you told him your choice, which was registered. The voting place in Macomb that year was James M. Campbell's store on the west side of the square and north of West Jackson street, known for years as Campbell's Corner.

Now the abolitionists were just as defiant as their opponents and sent word back to them that they would vote at 10 o'clock in Macomb. The records show there were nine votes cast for Hale. The archives in the attic of your court house have been thoroughly searched for the names of the nine men but they are not to be found. George, Andrew and Harmon Allison and Charles, John and James Blazer made up six of the nine men, but I am not positive as to the other three.

I am indebted to the late Alex. McClain for the information that the nine men met in the Court House yard. By lot they decided their places in the line, and then marched across to Campbell's Corner, single file, each with his gun on his shoulder. There were many men of the opposition there with guns and many who were there just to see what would happen. Of course, the vast majority of them, as now, felt that every man should have the right to vote his own sentiments, and probably that spirit had much to do with preventing bloodshed.

Sarah K. Allison Tells How Slavery Thwarted Cupid

In assembling data I have had the honor to receive a communication from Sarah K. Allison, now living at 504 East Washington street, Macomb. This communication, coming from the grand-daughter of Uncle Billy Allison.

one of McDonough county's foremost ardent abolitionists is especially interesting and I take pleasure in including it in its entirety, as follows:

"The first I remember of hearing about the Underground Railroad was when I was a little girl in our district school in the country. This was when Lincoln ran for President in 1860. We school children were political enthusiasts on the sides our fathers were on. We had gleaned many notions of right and wrong.

"I remember one day I was told we kept "niggers" in our attic. This I was too small to understand but that evening I told mother and asked what they meant. She replied, "You may tell them there are none there now." This did not improve matters much—because I heard a lot about the "nigger." One thing was he was not more than a sheep, with wool on his head, etc. These went home again to mother, who said, "They do not know it all—God made all people and he made the colored man too."

"Years later I heard father telling about taking some farm produce to market to a named place and returning with several colored people underneath the straw on the bottom of his wagon bed. After a time he noticed he was followed by three horsemen. They were gaining on him although he was driving as fast as the roads would permit.

"Coming to a gully or deep ravine he slowed down and told these colored people to jump out, and keep along the stream. This they did while he drove on as fast as possible. Yet he was overtaken and ordered to halt. This he did and explained he had marketed produce and was returning home but they turned everything upside down in the wagon—then let him go on.

"This incident father repeated more than once, because he said he never knew what became of them—those colored people. He searched the ravine for them

when it was safe to do so but he never heard from them in any way afterward.

“This related incident brought more questions from me and mother then told me “The Allison’s helped slaves to freedom and sometimes had kept them a while when pursued.” The attic in the old home had old gowns, hoods, coats, etc., used as disguises. They helped them reach the Blazars.

“The Quincy Station was from John Van Dorn’s. My mother’s oldest brother, John Brown, helped them from Missouri across. He had many adventures that worried his mother. She told me about this.

“My mother, Beulah Brown, and her sister, Lucinda Brown, married two Allison brothers, Harmon and Andrew, and came to reside near Macomb in 1851-1853. My father’s sister, Mary, married into the John Van Dorn family by a previous marriage at Quincy, Illinois. There was another wedding, the spirit of those independent times, made to slip “Twixt the cup and the lip” as it were. Elizabeth, my father’s sister, met a southern gentleman with southern principles, but Cupid played a part and he promised she should be free to hold her own views on the slavery question and so express them. The wedding was arranged for, guests invited, the table set, and guests, groom-to-be, minister and everyone there. Then he broke his promise and plead with her not to talk abolition politics in the home he was taking her to; for her own sake as well as his, he asked her not to do so.

“She replied he had commenced just a little bit too soon to curb free thought and the freedom of expression. She handed him back his ring and in her wedding gown went into the guest room where the company had gathered and announced there would be no wedding, giving her reason.

“The would-be groom was met by his party and friends and departed. Later Elizabeth married a Yankee doctor from Massachusetts. They agreed on politics.

“I wonder if there are not times when silence is really wisdom after all. So much depends but young America believes in independence and I glory in her spunk, don’t you?”

Actors in Black Drama, Wearied, Waive Historical Data

I was told by a friend that McDonough county had a complete account of the Underground Railroad in Clark’s History. That interested me and I secured a copy which I prize highly. It is an interesting and accurate account of the early history of the county, and as a whole the abolitionist question is treated ably, but the story of the Underground Railroad in McDonough county could be told only by the families who conducted it and they would not talk.

Mr. Clark did not mention an Allison and but one Blazer, John Blazer, who told him one story and only part of that. The strife and worry of twenty years with their neighbors had worn them out and they did not want to say or do anything that would stir up old scores. I can remember Mr. Clark visiting at my father’s house and insisting that my father tell him something but father and mother said no. He told them that John Blazer had given him a story and my father said that was enough.

The story was about Tom, a bright, likely young negro who was quite religious. My uncle asked him what church he was going to join. He said: “When I get up North I’m gwine to join the Yankee church. One thing sure I nebber will join the Presbyterian church.” Now that was quite interesting as the Blazers were Presbyterians. “No,” said Tom, “they are perfect debbils and I’ll never join that church. My master was a Presbyterian.”

While John Blazer told the anecdote of Tom he did not tell that Tom, together with an old negro, a young wench and two little pickaninnies were in the same shipment and that it was extremely muddy at the time. That cargo was held a week or more at Burton's.

At that time our family was keeping house for a year or more at the home of my uncle, John Blazer, his wife, my Aunt Mary, having died. The two negro men, the black woman and two pickaninnies were delivered to us by Burton and stayed in a bedroom just off the living room, and although neighbors happened in frequently we never heard a whimper from the babies. The neighbors were none the wiser except of course that the Blazers were always under suspicion of aiding negroes to freedom. Why didn't John Blazer tell Mr. Clark this? Twenty years of strife, threats of imprisonment, and an aversion against stirring up old animosities closed the lips of those men who could have written a first hand account of the underground railway in McDonough county or furnished the material for Mr. Clark to do so.

Early Recollection of How Armed Men Menaced Abolitionists

One of the early experiences of the Blazers, told to me by my father, occurred in the early 'forties. One evening there was a party of several men gathered across the ravine back of my grandmother Blazer's house, better known in late years as the Butcher place. They all carried guns and the Blazer men went into the house to get their weapons but my grandmother said, "No, do not take any guns, we will just go over and see what they want." They went but by the time they got there the men had disappeared. On their way back the boys discovered that their mother carried a meat ax under her apron.

When my cousin, Jennie Blazer Watson, was a little tot and just beginning to talk, a neighbor man, who

had very curly hair, came to my grandmother's. Jennie toddled up to him and said, "You have curly hair all over your head, just like little Maggie." Well, Maggie was a little black girl, who with her mother, previously had gone through on their way to Canada.

A child's prattle could not be used as evidence in court so nothing came of it except to cause more talk and more discussion of the fugitive slave law, for the Missouri Compromise and the Dred Scott decision were ably and fluently discussed at that time by school children and men who could neither read nor write.

Charlie, Runaway Slave. Led Charmed and Exciting Life

The most interesting story connected with any negro that passed through the underground railroad of McDonough county was woven around Charlie, a very light colored buck, with a sharp nose. He probably was a quadroon, or quarter-blood and was the property of a man by the name of Busch, whose plantation lay back some miles from the Missouri river. It was customary with the planters when the wheat was threshed to go to town and stay while negro boys hauled it to market. Charlie and two others were hauling the Busch wheat. When "teaed up" one night Busch and the other planters were discussing recent escapes of slaves from Missouri, when Busch turned banteringly to Charlie and asked him why he didn't try running away just for a little excitement. When Charlie went to his quarters that night he was thinking, and before he went to sleep he had it all figured out how he was going to make a break for Yankeedom.

Next morning Charlie was up early and on their way the boys scolded him for driving so hard. When they reached home Charlie, who was the boss when his master was not around, put the boys to loading the wagons with wheat for the next day's trip to the river. Charlie told the boys

he was going to a dance across the way and went to an old mammy and asked for some bacon and pone. She gave it to him but said, "Nigger what you up to? You know you would not need any bacon or pone if you were going to a nigger dance. You are up to some deviltry." Charlie struck out afoot, but not a word did he tell his wife for he said he knew it would break her heart. He had nearly forty-eight hours start, for the boys had to drive to the river and the master go back home to secure dogs and organize for the chase. When the pursuers reached the big river Charlie was housed securely with the Van Dorns and John Brown in Quincy.

The Blazers gave Charlie the credit of being the smartest negro that ever passed over the McDonough county route. After reaching Canada Charlie got some Pennsylvania Presbyterians interested in trying to get his wife and two children to Canada. They sent an old Presbyterian minister through, who arranged with Busch for their freedom for \$800. The preacher went back and raised the money but when he returned with the cash Busch had raised to \$1200. He went back to Pennsylvania, secured the \$1200 but Busch had concluded he must have \$1500. This Charlie would not agree to, determining to go back, steal them, and take them to Canada. He made several trips. Twice he succeeded in getting his wife and children and making a start. After the first attempt Busch had the mother and two children sleep in the loft above his and his wife's bedroom, which was reached by a ladder and a scuttle hole, but Charlie climbed to the top of the cabin, removed the clapboards and succeeded in getting nearly to the Illinois side of the Mississippi with his loved ones when the chase was so close it was evident they were going to be captured. On the advice of his wife Charlie jumped into the river and escaped in the dark.

A few days later he was at the Blazers on his way to Canada. Charlie by this time knew the road and did not require any conductor. Lodging and something to eat were his only needs and he always had a new and interesting experience to relate. One is worth a place here.

Ploughmen Have Encounter With Desperate Negro Slave

Charlie was on his way to Missouri and left Dobbins, the Fulton county station, for the Blazer post, but he had not gone far when a fog arose and Charlie lost his way. He wandered around nearly all night, finally gave up and lay down to sleep. When he awoke it was daylight and two men were standing over him. They ordered him to get up, which he did, but Charlie jerked a big dirk knife and made a slash at one of them. Charlie escaped and arrived at my father's early that night. They fed him but decided he had better strike out for the next station immediately. Charlie said he cut the fellow's clothing but did not think he was hurt much. The fact that one of them carried an ox whip suggested that the men from whom Charlie escaped had been plowing prairie and were at the time of the encounter looking for their cattle which had been unyoked and turned loose to graze during the night. This guess proved to be true, for later one of the ploughmen was found laid up from a slight wound such as might have been caused by a knife. However, the ploughman did not mention any set-to with the fugitive negro, declaring that he had accidentally fallen against a ploughshare. Perhaps they thought it would not be of any credit to them to acknowledge that a negro was too much for two of them.

Charlie did not succeed in stealing his wife and children but on the other hand they finally captured Charlie and sent him to the hemp works in Tennessee. There was only one place worse that you could send a negro and

that was the indigo works in Florida. There he would lose his finger nails inside of two years and be a dead nigger in five years. But Charlie was too smart for them to keep him any place unless they kept him chained. A few months later, just at the opening of the Civil war, Charlie crossed the Ohio river near Cincinnati and went up through Ohio. He told the Ohio people of his wonderful experiences, which they doubted, but he gave them the address of Henry Dobbins. They wrote to him and he verified Charlie's story.

After the emancipation of the slaves Charlie's wife and two children reached Canada, the Canaan of all negroes.

Neighbors, Families Divided On Question of Slavery

It frequently happened that families were divided on the slave question. The Chase family and an incident directly connected with the underground railway is worth a place in this article. A conductor from the station in Hancock county started to bring a darkey to the Allison station. A fog, which was very common at that time, rose and he found he was lost. After driving for some time he came to a house and called the man out and asked the road to Macomb and found he was just out south of town. He knew Rev. James Chase lived close to Macomb and was an abolitionist, so he inquired the way to Chase's.

He was told it was just a little way over to the Chase home and was directed to the Harvey Chase place, which stood just this side of Kill Jordan, now within the city limits of Macomb, where the Archie Fisher home stands. Now it happened that Harvey Chase, who had been reared as an abolitionist the same as James, had changed and was on the other side of the question.

When he called Mr. Chase out and informed him of his mission he was told that he was wanting James Chase

and was directed to his home, which was on the farm east of the county farm.

When the abolitionists asked Harvey Chase why he did not call an officer and have the darkey sent back to his master he explained by saying, "the stranger came to him in good faith and he, as a gentleman, was honor bound to keep the faith." But his brother, James, had a different explanation. He said "brother Harvey knew slavery was wrong and while he talked in favor of it he did not believe in it." The Chase brothers were gentlemen of honor.

Last Cargo of Negroes To Pass Over Underground System

The last cargo of negroes passed over the underground railway in McDonough county in 1860. This last cargo was not only the largest but the most valuable that ever passed over our route, and the only negro ever captured in this county was taken from this cargo. They were all big husky fellows, picked with a view to strength and endurance and were bought up for the hemp works of Tennessee. They were brought into a river town and were to be delivered the next morning when the master would get his money but that night they all escaped and reached Quincy, this was in June. The prize was a big one; \$500 per head was the sum offered for their capture.

The cargo of negroes had been out to Round Prairie two or three times and back-tracked to Quincy until things would quiet down, but was finally delivered to us by Pettyjohn of the Huntsville country one morning before daylight in September, 1860.

I was aroused and told to go to my uncle's to inform him of the arrival of the negroes. I rapped gently on the window of Uncle John's bedroom. He signalled with a light tapping on the pane to let me know that he understood. I returned home, and by the time

I had reached there the negroes had been stowed away, each in a shock of corn, and supplied with food and water. I am not sure at this late date whether there were eleven or twelve negroes in the cargo, as the shipments were then called. Clark's history incorrectly reports the number as five.

When Pettyjohn delivered the negroes at our home he started on his return trip immediately.

Just after daylight on a hill west of Middletown, or Fandon, he passed a man on horseback. At some distance Pettyjohn looked back and saw that the other traveler had stopped and was looking over the conductor and his empty train. Pettyjohn at once knew that he was suspected. The man on horseback was not one of those that took part in hunts for runaway slaves, but as afterwards told to my father, he happened to meet and mention the matter to Dave Chrisman who was the leader of the slavery-sympathizers in McDonough county. Clark's History reports that the driver got lost and left his team and wagon in a gully near Dave Chrisman's house, and in that way it was learned that the cargo had arrived at the Blazers. That was Dave Chrisman's story, and it was generally believed. There was no means of knowing that it was not true and Mr. Clark was justified in writing it as the abolitionists would not give the historian any facts. At the time this history was written the negroes had long since been free and the abolitionists were only too glad to dismiss the old strifes from their thoughts. Dave Chrisman was a bluffer and invented the story of finding the team near his house thinking it would add to his notoriety.

I recall very well that while the dozen negroes sat and sweat in the corn shocks, for it was a hot September day, my father and John Blazer flailed buckwheat just south of the John Blazer house and they had company all day long. Dave Chrisman was the first visitor. He had been the rounds and notified his followers and made

arrangements which were to be carried out that night. No one stayed very long but one visitor was not any more than gone when another rode up and would sit on his horse out in the road and talk for a time. All carried rifles, which was not unusual those times for there was still considerable game in the country. But the visitors were not the only people who had guns for two rifles stood inside the fence near where the two men flailed and talked to their neighbors while I sat on the fence, listened and watched and reported who was coming. The sober, quiet, determined men knew that trouble was ahead of them and when by themselves talked over their plans for the coming night when the valuable cargo must be delivered to the next station.

You may think it strange but each insisted that they should be in charge of the negroes when they started on the perilous trip and each had a good reason why he should go but John had the best argument. It was his turn and my father, when the time came, started up the prairie just after dark with a wagon load of grain covered with a tarpaulin. Before he had gone a half mile some twenty-five or thirty horsemen rode up, all carrying guns, and rode along for a mile or more and visited, when they dropped back and held a short consultation, and four came back, caught up with him, and rode several miles with him when they turned and rode away. My father went on to Bernadotte to mill and did not know the fate of the darkies until he returned home the next day.

Only One Negro Captured And Quarry Was Not Worth the Chase

Now John and the colored boys had swung off towards the timber and then went straight east up the prairie until even with the Dickie Craig farm. When they started to the timber they had to cross a new plank fence which had been built just along the south side of the Craig land.

Just as John and the negroes got on top of the fence Chrisman and his men, who had been lying in the shadow of the fence, raised up.

John Blazer said to the negroes, "Run boys for the timber." They did as told and all got away but one, which Chrisman hit over the head with a gun.

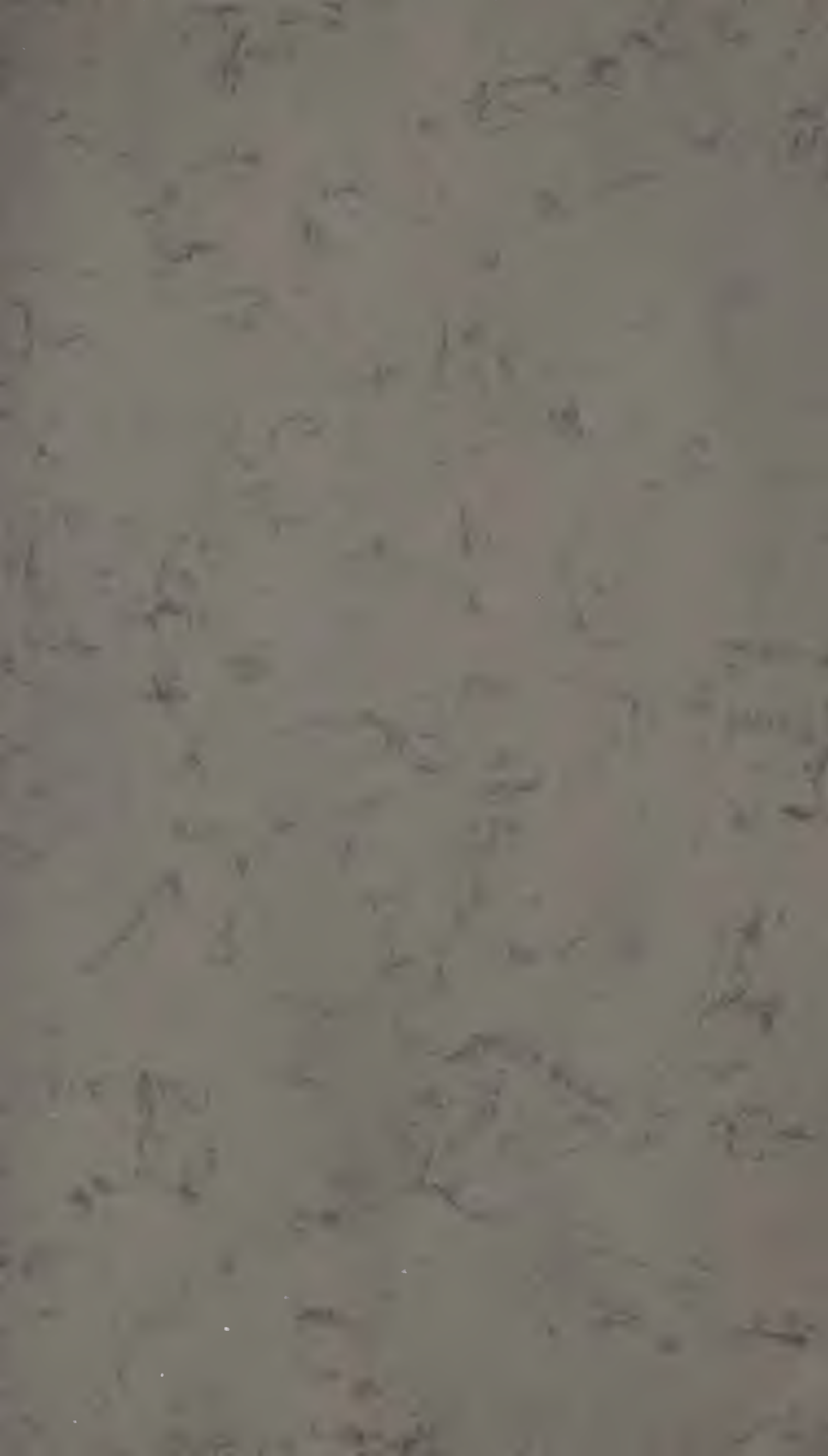
Chrisman, accompanied by one or two of the leaders, took the negro to Macomb where he was held in jail until the owner came and claimed his property. But Chrisman, as was often the case, then failed to get his reward, as the owner said he had lost his man's work, and spent so much money trying to get him back that he could not afford to pay anything.

Ten or twelve men, comprising the balance of the party that, together with Chrisman, had captured the negro, came back that night and threw clubs and rocks on our house and shouted and yelled. My mother went to the door which had no lock, and stood with an ax in her hand, ready to protect her home and children.

Threats that my father and uncle would be indicted by the next grand jury, that they had been caught red handed in transporting negroes and would have an opportunity to serve time at Alton, was not a pleasant greeting to their families. This did not go direct to the ears of my father and uncle. Even Dave Chrisman was too gentlemanly to discuss the question with the Blazers or Allisons. Those were trying times but do not conclude this condition existed all over the county. It was much worse in the neighborhoods where there was an underground station. Now, I do not believe any one who was not intimate with conditions, can realize just what it meant to a family to be in such strife and turmoil.

With the emancipation of the slaves by Abraham Lincoln, there was, of course, no further need for the underground railway, but many years and a new generation were required to wipe out the old animosities.

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